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ABSTRACT

Texts in educational psychology have been criticized because they allegedly fail to define the subject matter domain of the field, because they are written for instructors rather than students, and because no consistent theoretical position is taken. The fact that different texts stress different sets of data does not mean they fail to define the domain of a field, but rather that each author selects information which he or she feels will be of greatest value to students. In the case of "Psychology Applied to Teaching," information selected for the text was chosen after consulting with students, former students engaged in their first year of teaching, and instructors. Most sections of the text were written specifically for students, but in the Instructor's Manual chapters were organized and the test item files were written primarily for instructors. Instead of attempting to stress a single theoretical position, several theories are described because it is felt that each clarifies different aspects of teaching. It is unlikely that students will remember and consistently apply any particular theoretical position when they become teachers. It is preferable, then, to urge them to make occasional applications of techniques derived from many different views. (Author)

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AERA Session: The Use of Textbooks in Teaching and
Defining Undergraduate Courses in Educational Psychology

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The Rationale of Psychology Applied to Teaching

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Two questions have been raised regarding texts in educational psychology. The first is that most texts fail to define the subject matter domain of educational psychology. It has been suggested that lack of consensus about the field of educational psychology--as evidenced by differences in texts--might be taken as an indication that the field is in serious trouble or even that no such discipline exists. The second question centers on the value of texts. The point has been made that texts in educational psychology do not present knowledge in a form suitable for learning, partly because they are written for instructors rather than students, partly because no consistent theoretical position is taken and the reader is offered scattered bits of information. In this presentation I will react to these questions by describing the rationale of Psychology Applied to Teaching and by outlining what I believe students should be exposed to in a course in educational psychology.

First of all, I do not agree that there should be concern about differences in texts in any field of study. If the existence of divergent texts in an area of psychology is taken as an indication of weakness, many if not all subject matter specialties in this field are in a precarious state of health. Texts in introductory, developmental, abnormal, and

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social psychology--to mention only a few--vary as much if not more than educational psychology texts. This might be interpreted as evidence that all of these specialities are in a debilitated condition. Another interpretation is that there is too much, not too little, information that might be used by psychologists in these areas of interest. The fact that texts in educational psychology stress different assortments of information and are organized in different ways might be interpreted as an indication that so many potentially valuable insights are available, no single individual is able to describe all of them. If this is the case, there is little reason to be concerned about the vitality of educational psychology as a field of study. The main reason for this conviction can be explained by noting my definition of what a text in educational psychology represents: One person's selection of information described by scientists that might be of value to teachers.

If this definition is accepted as a point of reference it follows that every text in educational psychology will stress a different selection of information. The amount of information available is enormous and each author will be influenced by a unique pattern of experiences and circumstances. Among such determining factors are personality variables, undergraduate and graduate courses in psychology, state and local credential requirements, and characteristics of students in a particular institution. The selection of information in Psychology Applied to Teaching, for example, was influenced by a desire on my part to improve my own teaching. I was extremely dissatisfied with my initial performance as an instructor and I wanted to find ways to use what psychologists had discovered to enhance my skill

as a teacher. I approached this task with few preconceptions because I had taken an eclectic assortment of undergraduate and graduate courses and did not lean strongly toward any single theoretical position. I was also influenced by awareness that it was essential to cover certain topics to meet state credential requirements. Still another significant influence was the discovery that many of the students taking educational psychology when I first thought of writing a book were turning to teaching after having worked several years at other jobs. They wanted a course that would provide practical information in a usable form and were not at all shy about telling me so.

I assume that professors who decide to use my book are attracted to it because they perceive teaching, courses, and students essentially the way I do. I assume that those who use books written by other authors prefer a different selection and a different approach. Since every professor of educational psychology differs from every other, since each state has different credential requirements, since each teacher training institution and department has its own idiosyncracies, and since students are of infinite variety, it seems highly desirable that texts in educational psychology vary as much as they do. My answer to the first question, therefore, is that lack of consensus about the domain of educational psychology is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

The second question raises doubts about the effectiveness of educational psychology texts, partly because they are written for instructors, not students, partly because an assortment of information is offered as opposed to a single theoretical position. If Psychology Applied to Teaching is not

effective as a learning resource, it is not because I ignored students. As a matter of fact, the original selection of information to be included was based on interviews with twenty-five first year teachers. I asked them what they wished they had learned in their teacher preparation program, and many sections of Psychology Applied to Teaching reflect what they requested.

Even though many features of the text were included specifically for students, other features of the book--and the accompanying Study Guide and Instructor's Manual--were just as specifically provided for professors. When I consider a text for a course I try to estimate how much it will appeal to students but I also am concerned about how the selection of topics fits with my conception of what should be covered. I usually present supplementary information in lecture, but the text is the primary determinant of course content. When I look at the table of contents of a text I estimate how chapters might be grouped for examination purposes. I also peruse the test item file and decide how it might be used. I assume most professors follow essentially the same procedure and when I wrote the first edition of Psychology Applied to Teaching and prepared the Study Guide and the Instructor's Manual I did my best to include features so that instructors would have flexibility in selecting course content, making assignments for supplementary reports and observations, and preparing, administering, and scoring examinations.

As soon as the book was adopted and used, I began to receive feedback from professors in the form of letters calling attention to features they especially liked or disliked. When the time came to revise the book I took into account these observations as well as information supplied by thirty professors who responded to a questionnaire. It is accurate to say,

therefore, that many sections of the second edition of Psychology Applied to Teaching were quite specifically written for instructors--as well as students. The phrase "as well as" is used to stress that the needs of students and professors are not always mutually exclusive, particularly when students are preparing to become teachers. In some cases, professors may choose to emphasize certain topics to establish their prestige as scientists, or because of personal research interests, but professors and students of educational psychology share many of the same concerns.

This teacher-student-teacher relationship calls attention to aspects of instruction that are peculiar to educational psychology. Most future teachers are required to take a course in this field. The requirement is presumably based on the reasoning that those who study educational psychology will be more effective teachers than those who do not. Some of my more perceptive (and sometimes vindictive) students have pointed out that if this assumption is valid, I should be an exceptional teacher (and so should all other educational psychologists). The argument offered by one gadfly student went like this: "You say that I'm going to be a better teacher if I study educational psychology three hours a week for fifteen weeks. You've studied it full time for several years, which means you ought to be absolutely terrific as a teacher." The absentee rate, the yawn ratio, student performance on exams, and ratings on professor evaluation forms all lead to the inescapable conclusion that if I am a terrific teacher, not all of my students are sensitive enough to realize it. Those of us who teach educational psychology are clearly in a much more vulnerable position than fellow professors who teach other courses.

My own solution to the problem just described is to announce the first day of class that I have done a lot to increase my effectiveness as an instructor by applying psychology to teaching, but that this is an extremely complex and demanding profession and I am always striving to improve. I point out that in the text and in the classroom I will call attention to ways that I have found various psychological principles might be applied, but that I hope each student may be able to find better or more suitable ways to apply the same principles. Then, I do everything possible to practice what I preach, and many features of Psychology Applied to Teaching, the accompanying Study Guide and Instructor's Manual, were designed to encourage and assist instructors who use the text to do the same. If a text or instructor in educational psychology calls attention to research establishing the value of detailed feedback, for example, it doesn't take terribly perceptive students to recognize an inconsistency if the only feedback they receive takes the form of test scores posted on an office door. If the text or instructor calls attention to research on imitative behavior and the impact of modeling, to mention just one other example, what appears in a book or occurs in a class in educational psychology should be a demonstration of preferred methods of instruction.

Psychology Applied to Teaching, the Study Guide, and the Instructor's Manual were designed to be as consistent as possible with the various principles discussed. The implications of research on topics such as memory and transfer have been used to enhance the effectiveness of the book. The Study Guide is designed to facilitate mastery of the text and also to stimulate independent study. The Instructor's Manual contains a

complete file of short-answer questions as well as multiple-choice questions arranged in the form of ready to use exams. A detailed answer key is provided for Study Guide and short answer questions, and for each multiple-choice question booklet a feedback booklet is provided. The availability of detailed feedback makes it possible for instructors to use a mastery approach, the personalized system of instruction, or computer-managed instruction, in addition to traditional approaches.

Some texts in educational psychology are based exclusively on a learning theory point of view, others stress a consistent field theory approach, still others promote a humanistic frame of reference. Books of this type often stress the point that the best way for a person to make effective use of psychological knowledge to improve teaching is to be completely faithful to that particular point of view. In Psychology Applied to Teaching, by contrast, I urge the reader to consider how each of several theoretical positions helps illuminate certain aspects of teaching. In many chapters, for example, the observations of B. F. Skinner, Jerome Bruner, Kurt Lewin, Abraham H. Maslow, Arthur Combs, and Carl Rogers are highlighted, interrelated, and offered as the basis for classroom applications. My feeling is that teachers need all the help they can get and that it is potentially limiting to suggest that they concentrate on one theory and attempt to use it as the sole guide for improving instruction.

In Psychology Applied to Teaching (and in my own teaching) I have found that knowledge of principles of operant conditioning has helped me make effective use of instructional objectives and also served to call my attention to ways traditional grading practices may limit rather than

promote learning. Knowledge of field theory principles has helped me structure group discussions and assign independent study projects. Knowledge of Maslow's analysis of motivation has helped me arouse and sustain the interest of students. Knowledge of the learner-centered view of ^{Curl and Arthur} Rogers [^] Combs has made me sensitive to the significance of teacher-pupil relationships and aware that sometimes how I teach is of greater importance than what I teach. I have included information about each of these theoretical positions in Psychology Applied to Teaching because I am convinced each view has something to contribute to the improvement of education.

Whenever possible points made in Psychology Applied to Teaching are related to one theoretical position or another, but many suggestions for teaching presented in the text are based on isolated experiments or observations. Some educational psychologists feel that this reduces the value of a text as a learning resource because the book serves not as a consistent presentation of a coherent view, but as an informational reservoir or encyclopedia. I endorse a diametrically opposed view and believe that a text in educational psychology that functions as a reference work (and which contains "something for everybody") is the best possible way to present the information in our field. The contention that a single theoretical point of view is more effective than an encyclopedic approach seems to be based on two assumptions: First, that there is a firmly established single theory in psychology that is clearly superior to all other theories in terms of its potential value for teachers. Second, that students can be assisted to grasp this theory so completely by reading a text and taking a single course in educational psychology, they will

eventually use it as a consistent frame of reference for making almost all decisions about teaching.

I find it difficult to accept either of these assumptions. I don't believe that any single theory in psychology is comprehensive enough to serve as the basis for teaching. The fact that there are so many different texts in this field, all of which appeal to at least some professors, might be taken as evidence of a lack of unanimity of opinion about the best theory. Even if a widely endorsed, clearly superior single theory did exist, however, I doubt that it could be communicated to students in one quarter or semester to the point that it would serve as a focal point for their approach to teaching.

My skepticism is based on the following observations. The educational psychology course is usually taken at least one year and often several years before students actually function as full-time teachers. The course is commonly required and is perceived by many students as a means to an end--a requirement that must be met in order to earn a degree or a credential. Most students probably read the text primarily for the purpose of passing exams. Most exams consists of multiple-choice or short-answer questions that measure short-term memory of isolated bits of information. Most students are inclined to sell their texts at the end of the course. Despite all this, and even if a student did develop a unified theoretical conception of educational psychology and resolved to make consistent applications in the classroom, it would probably be an impossibility. Beginning teachers rarely if ever have complete freedom to teach as they please. They have to adapt to the conditions of a particular job.

Suppose, for example, that a student takes a course featuring exclusive emphasis on a learning theory point of view and a strictly technological approach. Imagine that between the time the course is finished and the time the prospective teacher seeks a job a great deal of thought is devoted to planning an approach based entirely on programmed instruction and behavior modification techniques. Then, consider what might happen if the budding Skinnerian finds that the only job available is in a school that features team teaching, and that the senior member of the team has decided that they will use Bruner's Man: A Course of Study as the basis for the curriculum and a Summerhill, participatory-democracy approach to maintaining classroom control.

When I worked on both editions of Psychology Applied to Teaching I tried to allow for the kinds of factors just noted and I operated in terms of these assumptions:

1. Different theoretical conceptions in psychology help clarify different aspects of teaching. Stress on only one theory, therefore, is limiting. It is preferable to acquaint the student with what are perceived to be strengths and weaknesses of several different views, and suggest how each view might serve as the basis for teaching practices.
2. It is unrealistic to assume that students who study for exams in a required undergraduate course will develop a global conception of a theoretical point of view so thoroughly they will remember it for several years and then apply it in the classroom. My primary goal in writing Psychology Applied to Teaching (and

preparing the Study Guide and evaluation materials) was to encourage the student to read the book carefully enough to become aware of the information available. I do my best to persuade readers that the book is worth keeping, because if they sell the text at the end of the semester, they will remember very little about educational psychology.

3. Instead of urging future teachers to try to develop a consistent theoretical point of view before entering the classroom, I suggest that they wait until after they actually obtain a job, discover the conditions under which they will operate, and deal with many problems as they emerge. After they have had several months of teaching experience I urge them to reflect on different theoretical positions and attempt to make consistent applications of different sets of principles.

My own recollections of my first year of teaching, as well as the responses of the beginning teachers I interviewed, convinced me that the first months in a classroom are experienced as a series of crises. A problem of some sort suddenly becomes apparent and the new teacher desperately seeks a solution. In Psychology Applied to Teaching specific teaching suggestions are summarized and presented so that a harried beginner can quickly find information likely to lead to solutions.

The book is specifically designed, therefore, to function as a reservoir or encyclopedia, and when students tell me they use it just that way, I take it as evidence that it is functioning as a helpful learning resource.

To sum up, I believe that it is an advantage for authors of texts in educational psychology to offer different selections of information, and

I am convinced that a book that presents information based on many different theoretical conceptions--as well as some observations not tied to any particular theoretical position--can function as an effective learning resource.